

“Sacred Conspiracy”

Rev. David Gregory

October 28, 2018

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost



First reading

John Donne

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Second reading

Ed Bacon in 8 Habits of Love

We all need community, in whatever form we find or create it, to give us courage, inspire us to change, and hold us accountable. We cannot make it through hard times alone, nor do we wish to experience the good times alone either. Sharing our pain and our joy with others helps us turn away from the bleakness of our fearful nature, and embrace the loved and loving self that is always within us, no matter how dire our situation is. Community helps us access our open-hearted selves. In isolation, we are but one small grain of sand that can easily be washed away. In our chosen Community, we become instead a rock that has the power to stand up to the strong currents of the ocean.

No one is an island. Anyone's death diminishes me, because I am involved in humankind, and don't ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for me. It tolls for you. It tolls for us. This is a moment to paraphrase our way beyond the gender exclusivity in John Donne and get to the point. The point is that each one of us has been diminished this week. We are emerging from the rubble of a week of hate. On Wednesday of this week, a white man with a history of violence shot and killed two African Americans in a grocery near Louisville, Kentucky, just after he had tried and failed to make his way into a predominantly African American church. This, during a week when suspected mail bombs were being sent to numbers of the President's opponents by a man who had posted hate-filled messages aimed at Democrats and minorities. Then, just yesterday, a man shouting anti-Semitic slurs, armed with an assault weapon and handguns opened fire in a Pittsburgh synagogue killing eleven people and wounding six others including some police officers.

How many times over these last several years have I laid aside a planned sermon in the face of the latest tragedy? How many times have leaders of every faith tradition been called upon to make sense of the senseless, to decry a particular form of hatred that has expressed itself in yet another act of violence? Each time seems like the last straw. A high school, an elementary school, a movie theater, a church prayer meeting, a dance club, a concert, a grocery store, a congresswoman's press event, a softball game, and now a synagogue. Places where we innocently gather without a single thought for our own safety have become the very places where we find ourselves looking over our shoulders and wondering. As the fences and walls go up around our schools and government buildings, how long might it be before places of worship will need a line item budget for security detail, metal detectors, and fences and walls of our own?

And then there are the broader cultural questions. How could such hatred exist among us? How could we stand by and let this kind of hatred and violence be emboldened? How could we tolerate leadership that throws a match on the ground only to condemn the wildfire that follows? How did we get here, and how can we evolve past it? What are the lessons in the School of Love that can possibly speak to us and give us some hope and confidence? Where is the evolution of consciousness that can lift us higher and help us transcend the bigotry, prejudice, and hatred that is growing stronger under minority rule?

The first lesson to be learned is one that we often repeat in this place. There is no fear in love; but love, when it is complete, casts out fear. Love and fear do not coexist. The antidote to fear is love. This concept is not exclusive to Christianity, but its expression is easily found in the teachings of Jesus, and in the words that I just shared, coming from the tradition associated with John the Apostle. It seems simple, and I want us to consider today that it is indeed simple. The strength of the idea is in its simplicity. Everything we see and hear from the world around us is based in either fear or love.

People are fearful of losing power, because loss of power means loss of control. The obscene amounts of money that flow into our elections and into the pockets of elected officials means that our government has been purchased by people who are fearful of losing their grip on what they have, whether it be wealth, privilege or power. And so free and fair elections are often neither free nor fair. The checks and balances we learned about in civics classes fifty years ago have been eroded and are in danger of being extinguished.

The temptation today is to meet fear with fear. I am afraid for my grandchildren as I look down the road. I am afraid that if we do not stem the tide there will be no habitable world for them, let alone for their children and their grandchildren. I am afraid for my own rights, the legal status of my own marriage, or the status of my extended family members who happen to be transgender, or Muslim or bi-racial. I don't like where this seems headed and I want it to stop. But my fear will not make it stop. My fear will be met with more fear, and it can only escalate from there. Let's breathe now.

Our friend Ed Bacon has said that sharing our pain and our joy with others helps us turn away from the bleakness of our fearful nature, and embrace the loved and loving self that is always within us, no matter how dire our situation is. Community, he says, helps us access our open-

hearted selves. In isolation, we are but one small grain of sand that can easily be washed away. In our chosen Community, we become instead a rock that has the power to stand up to the strong currents of the ocean. You ask me why I come here on a Sunday morning. I come here to access my open-hearted self. I come here because I feel weak in isolation. I feel lost and fearful in the strong currents of hatred that are attempting to swallow up everything and everyone that I value. Some would view religion in general as a crutch. I view my spiritual tradition and practice as a lifeline that pulls me along when I can find no other way forward.

For years, we have been pushing unity and oneness as an organizing principle in the Christian church. Forty years ago, we might have viewed this as simply a demonstration of human beings getting along, presenting a harmonious picture that others might want to join. In other words, we cannot express value in our religious communities when we are fussing and fighting over our differences of belief. But this is not just about growing a better church or a more inclusive community, or inviting more people to have whatever it is we think we have. This is about the very nature and survival of humanity, and our desire to live, evolve, and prosper. In other words, what was optional in the middle of the last century when this community was formed, is now a matter of life or death, and of fear or love, of light and darkness, of peace or violence. The middle ground has been ripped away from us, and there are but two things left for us to do: Number one, *vote*; Number two, gather in community. Pray and meditate in community. Raise the vibration in community. Find strength in community. Isolated we can be overwhelmed. In community we can become invincible.

Amen.

Note: The picture at the top of this sermon was taken at a recent CCC full moon hike.